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Two hundred head of gentle saddle horses could be sold in the Shortgrass Country in a week's time. Oldtime horse and mule dealers — are missing a change for revival. Years of no labor and few bands of mares have depleted the riding stock. Old age has blighted what's left.

Demand is for a horse young and stout, gentle and sound, and trained for rope and rein. Specifications further require that he be easy to shoe and know a few tricks to entertain the visitors to the ranch.

In the days of horse transportation, heavy usage gentled the riders and the ridden. Horses in those times pulled the vehicles; they didn't ride in them. Wet saddle blankets, turned day after day, were great pacifiers for man and beast. Lots of spooky outlaws were changed into children's pets by virtue of the distance traveled.

Nowadays, counting the Shetlands and the Clydesdales, there are probably 10 head of usable age horses that can eat oats all winter without making serious objections to being mounted in the spring. I may be high as I can't evaluate the age of the ponies that photographers use in the cities. So say between five and 10 head, if you like.

As for the young and stout condition that runs into large numbers. Horses increase until they are gentle and sound. Imported steeples stuck on a catfish gaff won't cripple a bronc. But after he is trained and broke, wind changes bring on terminal distemper and pea gravel caught in the hoof causes incurable lameness.

My dad used to keep every pasture filled by old mares and assorted geldings and unbroken fillies. The rendering plant stayed on standby for the good ones; the counterfeits defied the passage of time and resisted all the afflictions of horse kind.

To fill the easy to shoe limitation takes some thought. First, think where and how a horseshoe goes on a horse. Next, consider how many sailors, ever found a ship from which it was easy to scrape the barnacles from the bottom. I think they mean they want a horse to shoe that won't break half the nation's supply of manila rope and fill a hospital wing in the same session. Back brushing is easy; horseshoeing is hard.

I had a horse trader come by in the fall. Over the telephone, he offered two prospects so versatile of talent that the entire membership of the oldtime steer ropers association would have come out of retirement to own either horse.

The road leading to the ranch changes a horse's personality. Times before, I've heard of horses stable in San Angelo that would undergo distinct reversals while riding in a trailer out here.

He had a big gentle bay horse. In 40 miles of travel, the big gentle bay had developed into 16 hands of treachery that could be mounted only by a Hollywood stuntman schooled in the running man hold technique.

The other horse fell upon being saddled. All it would have taken to use him was an elephant or camel trainer able to make their beast arise with a pointed stick. He already knew how to lie down, so it wouldn't have taken much to finish his training.

I nearly bought the recliner. On cold mornings, an old pony lying on his side sure beats a sapsucker that's humped up so bad that his mainspring has pushed the saddle way up in back.

At my age, departure time isn't as important as confirmed arrival. It wouldn't be so bad to stand around smoking while your horse soaked the early morning prosperity out on the ground.

Probably the best place to check for gentle horses is the brewery that still shows off a team of draft horses. Thirty years ago, a cowboy regaled the bunkhouse telling of a Clydesdale he had in his stirng on a big outfit in Arizona.

Shoeing him, he said, was like rasping off a one by twelve board. He claimed however, that thought he horse weighed 1800 pounds, he never put an ounce of weight on the worker.

I put great store in the tale until his brother said later on that the farthest they were ever away from home was to make a train trip out of Fort Stockton, Texas. But I still believe those big horses are easy to shoe, or the brewery would have run out of help a long time ago.

Every morning that we leave the ranch mounted, I worry whether some of us are going to have to hook a ride back via the train or the county road grader. The old snips and the barneys are gone. They are going to be hard to replaced with a trailer bed as a training ground.